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What Is the Qur'an? A Spiritually Integrative Perspective

Nevin Reda 

Emmanuel College of Victoria University, the University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada

Kur'an
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ABSTRACT

This article explores the question 'What is the Qur'an?' from a spiritually integrative perspective, focusing attention on the importance of studying the spiritual dimension of scripture in the contemporary context. It is also in conversation with two ongoing, interrelated questions in Qur'anic studies: genre and the organization of the Qur'an - more specifically, the rationale for the arrangement of suras. For the Qur'an's spiritual dimension, the article looks to the Islamic mystical tradition, Sufism, which developed elaborate conceptualizations of the spiritual path in the various Sufi orders. The article examines the scripture's mystical substrate from an organizational perspective, conceptualizing it as a spiritual method for individuals, communities and humanity in general to grow from the animal self (*al-nafs al-ammāra bi-al-sū*) to the completed self (*al-nafs al-kāmilā*), each sura functioning as a step in the process. The Arabic word for 'order', *ṭarīqa*, literally means 'way', which is one reason why this article suggests that 'spiritual method' is also a good translation, highlighting a different set of nuances. It proposes that the Qur'an is organized similarly to a *ṭarīqa*, examining some suras at the beginning and end of the scripture and comparing them to the first and last stages of the Sufi path.

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Introduction

It is no secret that, over the past few decades, organized religion, particularly mainline Christian churches, has been rapidly declining in the West, with many leaving the church to search for spirituality outside of it. A Pew Research Center survey conducted in 2017, for example, has indicated that 27% of the adult population in the United States now consider themselves spiritual but not religious, up by 8% over the past five years (Lipka and Gecewicz 2017). Studies have suggested that the 'spiritual turn' is more a relocation of the sacred from outward expressions of religious identification and transcendental phenomena to immanent experiences and a preoccupation with the deeper layers of the inner self (Houtman and Aupers 2007, 306-308, 315). Although religious affiliations that are fed by immigrants, such as Muslims, seem to be stable, adherents, particularly women and youth, are also leaving the mosque in large numbers, as the documentary *Unmosqued* has vividly illustrated (Eid, Aly, and Mahmud 2013). Furthermore, the rise of Islamophobia and the creation and propagation of negative cultural depictions

CONTACT Nevin Reda  nevin.el.tahry@utoronto.ca  [@http://twitter.com/EmmanuelColleg2](http://twitter.com/EmmanuelColleg2)
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SONRA GELEN DOKÜMAN

01 Kasım 2019

Exegetical Crossroads

Understanding Scripture in Judaism, Christianity and
Islam in the Pre-Modern Orient

Edited by
Georges Tamer, Regina Grundmann, Assaad Elias
Kattan, and Karl Pinggéra

Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslam Araştırmaları Merkezi Kütüphanesi	
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DE GRUYTER

Nicolai Sinai

Two Types of Inner-Qur'ānic Interpretation¹

1 Introduction

The conference from which the present volume has emerged was entitled *Exegetical Crossroads*. Unlike other contributions to this book, mine will not examine intersections between post-Biblical and post-Qur'ānic scriptural interpretation in Judaism, Islam, and Christianity; rather, I shall focus on processes of interpretive engagement with Qur'ānic passages that are traceable within the Qur'ān itself. Yet this, too, will afford us the opportunity to inspect a crossroads of sorts: for one of the respects in which the Qur'ān intersects with Biblical literature is precisely insofar as it contains intriguing cases of scriptural self-interpretation. Since that phenomenon is much better researched with regard to the Bible, my main objective here is to present some of the ways in which it manifests itself in the Islamic scripture.² In doing so, I shall draw attention to some salient similarities and differences between the Hebrew Bible and the Qur'ān. My interest is squarely in the Qur'ān, however; I do not pretend to even remotely offer anything resembling a full account of inner-Biblical interpretation.

1 This book chapter was completed in January 2015 and only minor corrections were made afterwards. I would like to express my gratitude to Andrew Bannister for an extended response to a draft version of this chapter, as a result of which I have substantially refined, reconstructed, and expanded my argument in several places. I am likewise grateful to Marianna Klar for miscellaneous corrections and customarily thoughtful comments on a previous version of this chapter. To Georges Tamer I am indebted for tolerating a steady influx of supposedly final versions that were quickly superseded. – My English translations of Qur'ānic passages are based, with frequent modifications, on *The Qur'ān*, trans. by Alan Jones. Cambridge: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2007. Like Jones, I employ superscript "s" and "p" in order to mark verbs and pronouns for which singular and plural forms are undistinguishable in modern English.

2 For an overview of inner-Biblical interpretation see Fishbane, Michael, "Inner-Biblical Exegesis," in *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation. From the Beginnings to the Middle Ages (Until 1300)*, ed. by Magne Sæbø, vol. 1, pp. 33–48. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996, which conveniently epitomises Fishbane, Michael, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988; Menn, Esther, "Inner-Biblical Exegesis in the Tanak," in *A History of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. by Alan J. Hauser and Duane F. Watson, pp. 55–79. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003. For a preliminary treatment of inner-Qur'ānic interpretation see Sinai, Nicolai, *Fortschreibung und Auslegung: Studien zur frühen Koraninterpretation*, Diskurse der Arabistik 16. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009, pp. 1–22, 59–160, with further references to previous Biblical and Qur'ānic scholarship.

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Stefan Wild

Unity and Coherence in the Qur'ān

1 A Lack of Coherence and a New Branch of Exegesis

Muslim and non-Muslim views of the aesthetic value of language and style of the Qur'ān and its recitation are not as divided as they sometimes seem. But a majority of non-Muslim scholars for a long time did not see much literary value in the Qur'ān. Claude Gilliot and Pierre Larcher tell us:

"The literary structure and arrangement or construction [...] of the Qur'ān is far from being self-evident" and: "Even its weaknesses are viewed as wonderful, if not miraculous [...]. Read with eyes other than those of faith, the qur'ānic style is generally not assessed as being particularly clear [...]."¹

The beauty and the majesty of Qur'ānic recitation are, of course, in the ear of the believing listener. Both may be slightly less impressive in the eyes of the reader. But "that inimitable symphony, the very sounds of which move men to tears and ecstasy"² cannot be explained away. Navid Kermani in his book *Gott ist schön* has alerted us to the central aesthetic values of the *fascinans* and the *tremendum* comprised in the miracle of Qur'ānic recitation: "[...] throughout its history of reception, the Qur'ān has been reported to have an aesthetic effect uncontested by any other text in world literature."³ Thomas Carlyle on the other hand had written: "Nothing but a sense of duty could carry any European through the Qur'ān, it is [...] a wearysome, confused jumble, crude, incondite, endless iterations, long-windedness, entanglement—insupportable stupidity, in short."⁴ Such

¹ Gilliot, Claude and Pierre Larcher, "Language and style of the Qur'ān," in *Encyclopedia of the Qur'ān* 3, ed. by Jane D. McAuliffe, pp. 108a and 126a. Leiden: Brill, 2003.

² Pickthall, Marmaduke, *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an*. New York: Dorset Press, 1930, p. vii.

³ Kermani, Navid "The Aesthetic Reception of the Qur'ān as Reflected in Early Muslim History," in *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur'ān*, ed. by Issa J. Boullata, pp. 255–276. Richmond Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000, p. 255.

⁴ Carlyle, Thomas, *On Heroes, Hero Worship, and the Heroic in History*. London: Chapman & Hall, 1872, p. 40; Wild, Stefan, "'Die schauerliche Öde des heiligen Buches'. Westliche Wertungen des koranischen Stils" in: *Gott ist schön und Er liebt die Schönheit. God is beautiful and He loves beauty. Festschrift in honour of Annemarie Schimmel presented by students, friends and colleagues*

4.2 The Koran

The authority of the Prophet was based on his having transmitted the Koran and not in fact on what he had said himself. Nonetheless, since early on, opponents of the government authorities refer to "the Book of God and the *sunna* of His Prophet"; but the formula in question was never filled in as to its contents. One used it simply to plead for justice; the *sunnat al-nabī* as a corpus of specific *exempla* did not yet exist.¹ Yet similarly with regard to the Koran itself, it is by no means certain whether it had already assumed its canonical form and when this definitively occurred. At any rate, Khārijites in Iran were able to raise doubts about surah 12 or surah 42,² and in one place in Egypt an ivory table from the year 70 was preserved on which surah 5/121 was recorded in a somewhat deviant form;³ likewise, the inscriptions on the Dome of the Rock paraphrase the Koran rather than citing it word-for-word.⁴ But these examples – to which others might be added – can be interpreted in various ways. At any rate, it is reported that in Damascus, at a time when the old Church of St John still existed, the Koran reciter 'Aṭīyya b. Qays sat on its steps and recited from a standard Koran so that his listeners could correct their own copies (which were not necessarily complete).⁵ The inscriptions on the Dome of the Rock are provided with rudimentary diacritical marks, as they were expressly introduced at the time to safeguard the Word of God.⁶ As is known, for some years now the question of how the Koran was edited has been very controversial;⁷ nor is this the place to settle the matter. However, the question

1 Crone/Hinds, *God's Caliph* 59 ff. and previously; also for one subject area see already HT 56 ff.

2 See below Chpt. B 3.1.3.1.

3 Muḥammad al-Ṭūsī, *Tibyān* IV, 75, ll. 2 ff.

4 On Koranic quotations and allusions in the poetry of the Umayyad period cf. Zubaidi in: CHAL I, 322 ff.; for Farazdaq cf. also Bellamy in: *Festschrift Watt* 151 f.

5 AZ 346, no 699; Fasawī II 398, ll. 3 ff.; Ibn al-Jazarī, *Ṭabaqāt al-qurrā'* I, 513 f., no. 2125. His *nisba* is here given as al-Kilābī but elsewhere as al-Kalā'ī (cf. Khalīfa, *Ṭab.* 798, no. 2955 and Fasawī II, 332, l. 11; TT VII, 228, no. 418).

6 Moreover right inside the building, on the side of the arcade which faces towards the rock.

7 The points of view of the main opponents in the debate (J. Wansbrough, J. Burton, A. Neuwirth; without much evidence also Crone/Cook, *Hagarism* 17 f.) are well known. On the formulation of the problem cf. K. Rudolph in: ThLZ 105/1980/3 ff.; A. Neuwirth in: *Vorträge XXI. DOT* (ZDMG, Suppl. 5), pp. 183 ff. and A. Rippin in: *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies* (ed. R. C. Martin), pp. 151 ff. The dispute is essentially ongoing in the Anglo-Saxon world but in part is being fought out with categories that were developed in German Old-Testament research. It has remained unnoticed up to now that in more recent Soviet Arabist works the Koran has been viewed as the fruit "of collective effort" (cf. Batunsky in: *Religion*

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Onnelika Neuvirt, The Qur'an and Late Antiquity: A Shared
Heritage, terc. Samuel W. Linder, Oxford: Oxford Uni., 2013.

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Qur'an and Bible

01 Kasım 2013

10.1 SIMILARITIES, DISSIMILARITIES

10.1.1 Biblical Narrative—Qur'anic Drama

The relationship between the Qur'an and the Bible¹ is not easy to define. Already in their literary form, the two seem to be distant from each other: unlike the Bible, the transmitted Qur'an is not a text to be read continuously. It does not narrate chronologically structured salvation history running from creation down to the time of the recording of the text, as is true *grosso modo* for the Hebrew Bible, where a "world drama" unfolds with the acts of creation—election—Exodus—settling in the land—exile—promise of redemption. The Qur'an sketches no comparably grand picture of history, although it likewise assigns a prominent place to the creation of the world and the history of the elected people, and although the Qur'anic community already at an early point understood itself as a new people of God led by a prophet akin to Moses. Also unlike the Hebrew Bible, it offers no spectrum of narrative, prophetic, poetic, and wisdom texts clearly assigned to individual books, but rather combines differing types of text into the new genre of the "sura," which is represented by the Qur'an alone. Neither does the Qur'an follow, in the style of the Gospels, the life and work of a divinely dispatched charismatic proclaimer and his founding of a community down to his death and the conclusion of his ministry. Although the Qur'an is the decisive document for the Islamic community's formation and reclaims for its proclamation a speaker endowed with divine inspiration, it offers neither a history of the community nor a biography of its proclaimer. Instead of laying out a salvation historical past, it rather summons up the eschatological future in its early texts, and in its later parts debates the implementation of the scripturally based monotheistic order of society in the present.

Concerning its diction, however, the Qur'an is indeed oriented to biblical models of speech; even more, it is wholly "prophetic speech." For what in the case of the Hebrew Bible was only achieved exegetically in retrospect, the reinterpretation of all parts of the corpus into one prophecy² grounded in inspiration, in

1. This chapter concentrates on questions that have already been treated in Bible scholarship but have not yet been posed for the Koran. The internal Koranic development of the community's perception of the Bible is discussed elsewhere; see chaps. 8 and 9, as well as chap. 3, 116–119.

2. See Kugel, "Poets and Prophets."